

The Truth About George Washington's... DENTURES!

Historians may not know for sure whether George Washington chopped down a cherry tree, but they do know this: The father of our country **never** owned a set of wooden dentures.

The myth of Washington's wooden teeth is rooted in fact, however. He endured horrible dental problems throughout his life, suffering from infected and abscessed teeth, and inflamed gums. Tooth pain plagued him almost constantly while he commanded the Continental Army.

In 1992, columnist Jack Anderson reported that General Washington submitted bills totaling nearly \$500 (about \$25,000 in today's money) for barbers in 1775. Anderson conceded that Washington probably wasn't being vain. "Today, a barbering bill of roughly \$2,000 a month would demand a close look at the general's coiffure," Anderson wrote. "But barbers often doubled as dentists, and Washington's notoriously bad teeth needed more attention than his hair."

Although he took better care of his teeth than most colonists - Washington brushed them daily - he'd lost most of his teeth by his mid-50s. He possessed just one tooth - a lower left bicuspid - when he was inaugurated in 1789 as America's first President.

Washington embarked on a long and often fruitless quest to find a comfortable pair of dentures. He wore his first full set of dentures, made by noted denture maker John Greenwood. The base was made of hippopotamus ivory, with the teeth made of ivory and human teeth.

Greenwood made three other sets of dentures for Washington. In 1797, Washington wrote to Greenwood about one set: "Sir: I must again resort to you for assistance - The teeth herewith enclosed have, by degrees, worked loose; and, at length, two or three of them have given away altogether - I would thank you for returning them as soon as possible for although I now make use of another set, they are both uneasy in the mouth and bulge my lips out in such a manner as to make them appear considerably swelled... Send with the teeth, springs about a foot in length, but not cut; and about double that length of a tough gold wire, the size you see with the teeth, for fastening the springs - Accompany the whole with your account, and the amount shall be immediately sent by post in a bank note. I am Sir Your Very Humble Servant."

In 1798, Washington complained to Greenwood about a set of dentures that had quickly become discolored. Greenwood replied that the stains were "occasioned either by your soaking them in port-wine, or drinking it. Port, being sour, takes off all the polish - I advise you to either take them out after drinks and put them in clear water and put in another set, or to clean them with a brush and some chalk fine scraped."

A set of George Washington's dentures is on display at his home in Virginia. The New York Academy of Medicine in New York has Washington's last lower denture, made by Greenwood, as well as his last remaining natural tooth, which became an ornament on Greenwood's watch fob.

Portraits of Washington taken at different stages of his life seem to chronicle his ongoing dental problems:

Year	Artist	Characteristics
1757	Charles Wilson Peale	Painted when Washington was 25 and still had most of his teeth, the painting shows his mouth to be small.
1776	Charles Wilson Peale	The painting shows a scar on the left cheek from a fistula caused by an abscessed tooth. Peale may have made Washington a set of dentures to replace an uncomfortable set.
1795	Rembrandt Peale	Washington's mouth is seen as puffy and swollen.
1796	Gilbert Stuart	For Washington's presidential portrait, the artist reportedly packed cotton inside Washington's mouth to support the lips.